

Mindfulness with Children

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Practice mindfulness yourself... otherwise you will not model it! Share your experiences with the kids. This will help them understand how to apply it in daily living.
2. Do not use mindfulness as a disciplinary tool. It should be fun and pleasurable.
3. Do not tell a child, "be mindful!" Instead, ask the child, *what are you noticing right now? Where is your focus of attention? Where did your thoughts take you?*
4. Use mindful movement or mindful walking for energy releases. Or if they are fidgeting, *"Notice the feeling of your body when it is fidgety. What sensations do you notice? Does your body feel differently as it becomes more still? See what you notice."*
5. Encourage children to share their experiences.

ACTIVITIES: Get into a *mindful position* (feet flat on floor, back erect (but not rigid), hands resting in lap, chin slightly tucked, eyes closed or gazing downward softly).

1. 3 to 6 LONG, SLOW-DEEP BREATHS (engages the system of rest and digest):

- a. *Get into your mindful body.*
- b. *Take 3-6 long, slow deep breaths, breathing in through the nose all the way to the belly (your belly should expand) and out through the mouth until you can't push air out any longer.*

2. 10 MINDFUL BREATHS

- a. *Get into your mindful body.*
- b. *Listen to the bell until you cannot hear it any longer.*
- c. *When you can no longer hear it, raise a hand. Then, put your hand on your belly.*
- d. *Begin to count your breaths silently from 1-10. Inhale, exhale, 1. Inhale, exhale, 2. Inhale, exhale, 3 and so on.*
- e. *When your mind wanders, as it will, label it "thinking" and return to counting your breaths.*

A child can give the instructions and ring the bell at the beginning and the end.

3. FINGER BREATHING

Have the children put up their nondominant hand, palms facing inward. Taking the dominant hand, begin to move up the thumb on an inhale, and down the thumb on the exhale. You will hit the place of stillness between breaths at the side of the palm. Then, move up the pointer finger on the inbreath, and down the pointer finger on the exhale. Continue with the other fingers. When you get to the end, reverse. Trace the fingers back and forth 5 times each.

4. SURFING THE BREATH

Have the children lie down flat on their backs with arms at sides, eyes closed. Put a paper boat on each child's belly (they can make the boats!). Do the exercise below for 5- 10 minutes, then talk about it.

- a. *Imagine your belly is the ocean, with waves rising and falling.*
- b. *Feel the boat moving up and down with each wave.*
- c. *If your mind wanders off, label it "thinking" and return to your waves.*
- d. *Notice how each wave is different. Some are taller, some shorter, some choppy, some smooth.*
- e. *See if you can feel the places of stillness between the waves. Notice how those places are also different... some shorter, some longer.*
- f. *See if you can feel the beginning of each new wave as it begins to arise.*

5. PRACTICING LISTENING

We live in a world of sound. Sounds arise in our bodies (like gurgling or swallowing), in our classroom (like shuffling or air conditioning) or outside of the room (perhaps birds or ambulances). Do the exercise below and then process what the children noticed.

- a. *A bell will ring. Listen to the sound of the bell until you can hear it no longer, then listen for sounds.*
- b. *You do not need to search for sounds. Sound will arise and pass. Sometimes there may be several sounds simultaneously. Other times, there might be silence.*
- c. *If your mind wanders, as it will, label it "thinking" and just begin to listen again.*

6. MUSCLE RELAXATION *Get into your mindful body or lie flat on backs with eyes closed. For each muscle, you will squeeze the muscles as tightly as possible for 5-10 counts, then release. If your minds begin to wander off, label it "thinking" and return to the exercise.*

- a. *Feet: curl your toes and squeeze your foot muscles (raise feet out slightly if sitting)*
- b. *Ankles: flex your ankles back (raise feet out slightly if sitting)*
- c. *Calf muscle: tighten by pushing feet into floor (make them hard as stone).*
- d. *Thigh muscle: tighten by pushing feet down into floor (make them hard as stone).*
- e. *Buttocks: tighten by squeezing.*
- f. *Stomach: tighten by pulling in and squeezing.*
- g. *Arms & Hands: With arms bent and fists forward, tighten your upper and lower arms. Make fists by clenching hands.*
- h. *Shoulders: Raise as high as possible then drop.*
- i. *Face: Clench jaw, squeeze eyes and squish nose.*
- j. *Process what the children noticed as they squeezed and relaxed each body part.*

7. MINDFUL MOVEMENT.

- a. *Stand with your feet hip width apart (hold chair for balance if necessary)*

- b. *You are going to move your body, keeping your mind focused on the sensations of the body. When your mind wanders, label it “thinking,” and return your focus to the movement.*
- c. *Lift one foot onto the toe and slowly rotate your foot, noticing sensations. Now, lift the other foot and rotate it. (With older kids, you can sync the breath to the rotation, breathing in half way around and breathing out for the other half).*
- d. *Bend your knees slightly and rotate your hips one way and then the other. (With older kids, you can sync the breath to the rotation as above).*
- e. *Lift your arms half way up breathing in. Bring your arms back down breathing out.*
- f. *Put your arms out to the sides palms up. Bend your arms, touching your shoulders, breathing in. Open your arms back out as you exhale.*
- g. *Rotate head slowly one way and then the other. (With older kids, sync the breath by inhaling half the way around and exhaling on the other half).*
- h. *Bend over at the waist, exhaling the breath out. As you stand up inhale.*

8. NOTICING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

We often do not pay attention to things that are in our everyday environment. Our minds are wandering and we do not see what is right in front of us.

- a. *Close your eyes. Feel relaxed. Let all the tension flow out, feeling your muscles release, and your body feeling calm.*
- b. *Now, open your eyes. Slowly gaze around the room. See if you can see something that you never noticed before. Perhaps, it is a pattern in the carpet or ceiling or the way the light reflects in the window. Perhaps it is a picture on the wall.*
- c. *Notice any thoughts. If you are judging what you are seeing, get curious instead.*
- d. *Continue to silently look to see things you may never have noticed.*
- e. *When I ring the bell, we will stop and share what we observed.*

9. NOTICING BODY SENSATIONS

Rub your hands together for 30 seconds. What do you notice? These are body sensations. (warm, tingling, sweaty, what else?) What does your body feel like when you are tired? When you are excited? When you are sad? You can do this exercise with many different emotions over several days depending on the ages of the children.

10. TALKING ABOUT WHAT FEELINGS NEED

We can also talk about ways to take care of our feelings. If you are experiencing a strong emotion, what does it need? If you are sad, it may be helpful to cry, put your hand on your heart, give yourself a gentle hug, ask for a hug, or curl up with a favorite cuddle toy, blanket, or pet. When you are nervous, scared, you might need to take deep breaths, put your attention into the feelings of your feet connected with the ground, or talk to someone. When angry, it may be helpful to run or take a fast walk to get some of the energy out of

the body or to make horses lips (blowing out air through the lips so they flap). When frustrated, maybe you need to take a time out or take a few deep breaths and try again.

11. SENDING KIND THOUGHTS

We can send kind thoughts to specific people and to groups of people. Have the child close their eyes and visualize someone, perhaps a classmate. The child can also send kind thoughts to him/herself. Begin with thoughts such as: *May (I/you/name) be safe. May (I/you/name) feel calm and relaxed today. May (I/you/name) be happy. May (I/you/name) be healthy and strong. May (I/you/name) be peaceful.*

Have the children silently say as many kind thoughts as they can think of themselves and then share one of their kind thoughts with the class.

MINDFULNESS RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND ADULTS WORKING WITH CHILDREN

Greenland, Susan Kaiser, The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate (2010). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Hawn Foundation, The Mind-Up Curriculum. (2011). Scholastic, Inc.

Kabat-Zinn, Myla and Jon, Everyday Blessings: The Inner Workings of Mindful Parenting. (1997) New York: Hyperion.

Mindful Schools has online training courses for teachers. www.mindfulschools.org

Naumburg, Carla, Ph.D. Ready, Set Breathe: Practicing Mindfulness with Your Children for Fewer Meltdowns and a More Peaceful Family (2015). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.—for kids up to 10.

Saltzman, Amy, MD, A Still Quiet Place: A Mindfulness Program for Teaching Children and Adolescents to Ease Stress and Difficult Emotions (2014). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. (guided meditations accessible on internet as well as on CD)

Snel, Eline, Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids and Their Parents (2013). Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc. (guided meditations with a CD included)

Willard, Christopher, Child's Mind: Mindfulness Practices to Help Our Children Be More Focused, Calm and Relaxed (2010). Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

For further training or information, contact:

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